

The Buddy System by flippyspoon

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Summary:

Billy becomes pals with Nance. Who knew? Steve smokes weed and sings Fiddler on the Roof. Jonathan maintains.

The Buddy System

Author's Note:

This is so messy but it sure was fun to write. It has typos too but I am tired. I did try to figure out what was considered a good SAT score in the 80's but don't look too closely lol.

Spring 1985

Friday

Billy was actually hoping Karen Wheeler would *not* answer the door but when she did he was, once again, all charm. He smiled like honey, leaning on one foot, his shirt open to mid-chest just so. He watched Karen melt, feeling the little shiver of satisfaction at getting that reaction out of somebody he had absolutely no intention of following through with.

“Hey, Mrs. Wheeler,” Billy said, voice low and sweet.

“Hello, Billy.” She flushed, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. She was dressed casual, not in the silky robe get-up she’d been wearing the last time he’d seen her. Now she laid a hand on her chest as if embarrassed by her sweater set. “How are you tonight?”

Billy leaned in the doorway. “Doing just fine, Karen- Oh, gosh. My manners. Mrs. Wheeler, I mean.”

She went a bit deeper in the red and waved a hand. “Oh, that’s alright. You can call me Karen.”

“ *Karen* ,” Billy said, and fluttered his eyelashes just a dash. “Got a study date with Nancy tonight. She up there?”

“Yes...” Karen Wheeler smiled, maybe slightly disappointed, and

opened the door wide. "Go right ahead. Up the stairs on the left- Oh, would you like something? Soda?"

He followed her inside, pausing with her at the stairway. "Oh, I'm just fine. Maybe I'll catch you later if I need any uh..." His lips curved up, following the innuendo. "*Refreshment*."

"Certainly." Mrs. Wheeler nodded and cleared her throat. "Of course."

"Oh, and I'll make sure to leave Nancy's door open," Billy said. "Just so you're not worried about any...hanky-panky." He tossed in a wink for good measure and made his way up the stairs, swinging his butt with a little extra verve, which was likely way too much verve.

At the top of the stairs, Billy's entire demeanor shifted and he leaned in the doorway to Nancy's room. She hadn't noticed him yet as she lay on her stomach atop her bed, pouring over a page of notes. Big plush white wrought iron bed. No stuffed animals, though ceramic cats made a few appearances. Somewhere, there was probably a music box.

"Nancy Wheeler," Billy said loudly, watching her gaze turn to him, though she did not startle. "The princess of Hawkins, Indiana. Wow. This is *exactly* what I pictured." It wasn't true. He'd thought there would be teddybears and flowery wallpaper and there wasn't.

Nancy eyed him warily. He thought he detected a note of indifference rather than the reflexive disdain he might have expected. "Hey, Billy," she said, sitting up on the bed and crossing her legs under her. "So it's the AP exam you need help with, right? American Lit?"

Billy sneered a little at that. Spring of senior year and Hawkins was just realizing that Billy Hargrove had missed his junior year AP English exam. If he didn't pass the do-over he'd get bumped down to regular dumbass English. Which really didn't matter, he supposed. But it was the principle of the thing.

"I dunno that I need help," he drawled. "So much as I was required to meet with you to study for it."

“Right.” She was ignoring his attitude, barely looking at him, her Trapper Keeper open in her lap. Billy found this irritating. “Well, obviously I can only help you up to what my class has covered so far... Although I’m a little ahead. Just don’t ask me to explain Flannery O’Connor.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He was still hovering there in the doorway but now he ambled into the room, attracted by a corkboard on the wall all covered with pictures. He leaned on her desk, glancing back to see if Nancy was watching. She wasn’t and he inspected the photos. There was a lot of Steve represented and Jonathan Byers was just starting to edge him out. Interesting that Steve was still up there at all. There were lots of pictures of Nancy and her brother and Nancy and that redhead who’d died because of some toxic waste or something. He’d skimmed that story in the paper. Nancy was immersed in a textbook and Billy leaned way over to look closer at a picture of Steve grinning in his basketball uniform, his tongue out as he grinned, his hair sweaty and sticking out in all directions. The corners of Billy’s mouth reflexively turned up as he gazed at it.

“You want to have a seat and study?” Nancy said. “Or do you just want to stare at pictures of Steve?”

Billy’s ears perked up and he jerked back, turning on his heel. Her little quip was startling and he didn’t have a comeback. Anyway, it was probably better not to bring attention to it. She was probably just fucking with him. He grabbed her desk chair and spun it around, sitting in it backwards. She glanced at him, looked vaguely disgusted in general, and went back to staring at her work.

“Um...you want to go over my notes first?” Nancy said.

“Fan *tastic* ,” Billy said. Nancy popped the rings in her binder and handed over a thick sheaf of notebook paper. He looked it over, skimming the themes of *The Great Gatsby* , *The Sound and the Fury* , and *The Crucible* among other texts. Billy got hung up on *The Sound and the Fury* and frowned. He turned the pages over, finding it blank and rifled through the rest of the notes again. He clicked his tongue. “This all you’ve got on Faulkner?”

He watched her brow furrow. “Yeah...”

“No ‘fall of the Southern aristocracy’ shit?” Billy said, looking up at her, all innocence. “Most of this is about non-linear storytelling and...Benjy’s castration.... Hmm. Does somebody have a fetish?”

“Oh my God,” Nancy said, rolling her eyes. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack,” Billy said with faux sincerity. “Gotta pass this exam, ya know.”

“Kinda sounds like you don’t need my help,” Nancy said, shutting her textbook.

“I *don’t*,” Billy said.

“Then why are you here?” Nancy said, over-enunciating.

“Because I was required to come,” Billy said, matching her tone.

“Great, you showed up,” Nancy said, waving at him. “You can go now.”

“Wheeler,” Billy said, clutching a hand to his heart. “Where’s your sense of academic duty and achievement? I have to get my money’s worth.”

“Why are you *really* here?” Nancy said, fixing him with a determined glare, her lips pursed.

“I just want to get to know you better, Wheeler,” Billy said, in the same husky tone he’d used with her mother.

“*Please* .”

“I’m serious,” Billy said. “There’s just something about the way you...act like you know *everything* that turns me on-”

“Will you please leave?” Nancy said, more demanding. “I know when a guy is trying to flirt by acting like a total dick and I’m dating Jonathan and even if I wasn’t-”

Billy burst out laughing. He slapped his knee. “Oh Jesus... I am *not* into you. Not even a little bit. Impressive ego you’ve got there

though.”

“Fine. Then...?” Nancy waved her arms, as if searching for an answer. “Don’t give me that requirement bullshit. There’s no way you care about that stuff.”

Billy sat back and shrugged. He reached for his pack of Marlboro Reds and tapped a cigarette out. “I was curious.”

“Ugh, don’t smoke in my room,” Nancy said. “You’ll stink it up.”

Billy sighed and got to his feet. “I’ll open the window then-”

“No!”

He glared at her and she reached over to her nightstand, grabbing a cup full of Tootsie Pops. “Take one of these, if you’re having a nic fit or something.” She tossed him a sucker.

Billy caught the sucker and cast her a sly look. “You want to watch me suck on this, do you?” Billy said, unwrapping the lolli and slipping his cigarettes back in his pocket.

“You’re disgusting,” Nancy said.

“Prude.” He stuck the Tootsie Pop in his mouth. She wasn’t a prude, he well knew. Tommy had told him all about Nancy “The Slut” Wheeler. Of course, Tommy was full of shit almost one hundred percent of the time but the truth was likely somewhere in between. He knew enough.

“Go,” Nancy said. “Or tell me why you’re here. You’re wasting my time.”

“I couldn’t turn down a chance to see the home turf of the girl who broke Harrington’s heart,” Billy said. He wandered over to her dresser and picked up a bottle of perfume, sniffing it. “I’m a curious guy. Sue me.”

“Steve,” Nancy said. She laughed, even covering her mouth. “You’re here because of Steve. Of *course* , you’re here because of Steve.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” He said, an icy feeling crawling up his neck.

“You just always seem awfully interested in the guy you beat the hell out of not too long ago,” Nancy said. She shifted on the bed, sitting on her ankle, her leg swinging next to her.

“Yeah, well it’s a shitty town and there’s nothing good on TV,” Billy sputtered, scowling. He picked up a ceramic puppy on her dresser and grimaced at it, mimicking its sad sack expression. “Just fuckin’ weird is all.”

“What’s weird?” Nancy said.

Billy licked his lips and suddenly everything he’d thought whenever Nancy Wheeler caught his eye came pouring out: “Oh, *I* don’t know! You were what, some mousie little sophomore nobody, scored King Steve? Best looking guy in school probably, popular, basketball star, good looking, charming whatever, then turned him nice and soft and sweet and pussy-whipped and then you *cheated* on him with *Byers* ?” Billy shook his head in disbelief. “I mean... *Byers* ? And dumped Harrington’s ass like a hot potato? And...you’re supposed to be the *nice* girl.” Billy snorted to himself. “Hawkins is weird as hell.”

Nancy was staring at him, her jaw somewhere in the vicinity of her plush grey-blue carpeting. “Um...” She twirled a pen between her fingers. “Billy, are you aware you mentioned his looks *twice* ?”

“I’m talking about how he’s perceived, Wheeler, “ Billy said. “I’d expect you to know that.”

“Okay,” Nancy said, looking far too smug. “So...you’re *mad* at me? For...breaking up with Steve?”

“It’s all just sooo fascinating is all,” Billy said. “Guys have one fight, you skip town with Byers, dump Steve... Of course, he’s still friends with you because he’s *masochistically* nice, nice sad Harrington-”

“How’d you know we had a fight?” Nancy said.

“What?” Billy was still clutching the damn ceramic puppy and he fumbled as he set it down hard on the dresser, almost knocking over

a picture frame.

“How the hell could you possibly know we had a fight before I ditched with Jonathan?” Nancy said.

Billy crossed his arms, defensive. “I dunno, at that Halloween party you guys went into the bathroom and came out looking *not* happy at all and then you showed up at practice and Harrington came back looking like Hall had just called it quits with Oates-”

“Wow, I was so wrong,” Nancy said. “You’re not at all obsessed with Steve.”

“I’m *not* obsessed,” Billy said, almost growling. “I’m...bored.”

“When I’m bored,” Nancy said, “I read a book.”

“Ugh.” Billy tapped his foot. “I was just curious as to why.”

“Why...?”

He was dangerously close to revealing everything if he hadn’t already. But he was also close to a little extra information. Billy couldn’t resist. “Why Byers over Harrington. Doesn’t make any sense.”

Nancy chuckled at that, and gave him what might have been construed as a pitying expression. “It’s complicated. Alright? You love who you love. Don’t you?”

Billy swallowed and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I *guess* .”

He felt a little bit exposed suddenly. He wasn’t sure if she’d forced his hand or if he’d voluntarily put his cards on the table, at least a few of them. Now she didn’t look pissed so much as curious herself. He didn’t like that at all.

“Let me ask you a question,” Nancy said.

“What?” Billy said, already bracing for impact.

“How the hell are you in AP classes?”

Billy laughed at that, a genuine laugh. "Why shouldn't I be in AP?" Billy said, raising an eyebrow.

"C'mon," Nancy said. "You don't scream 'scholar.'"

"What is it, Wheeler?" Billy said, leaning back, feeling relaxed again. "The hair? The earring? Just short circuits your small minded small town sensibilities?"

"Oh! *I'm* small minded?" She narrowed her eyes. "You're a *neanderthal*."

"Yeah, but I'm a California neanderthal," Billy said.

Nancy actually chuckled at that, and for the first time was laughing with him instead of at him. It was almost nice. "So you're pretty much going to ace this AP exam," Nancy said.

"Probably." Billy shrugged. "English is my best subject. It's mostly bullshitting."

"What's your GPA?" Nancy said.

"What's yours?" Billy shot back.

"Four point oh."

"Huh." He shrugged. "Three six."

"That's good for AP classes."

"Oh, that wasn't patronizing," Billy cracked.

Nancy grabbed a Tootsie Pop for herself and stuck it in her mouth and Billy wandered back over to the pictures, feeling a little easier about scoping Steve photos. There was one of Steve in swim trunks at a lake. He tried to etch it into his brain.

"What'd you get on your SATs?" Nancy said.

Billy glanced back and tossed her a wink. "Baby, you don't want to know."

“Try me.”

Billy stood up straight and took a big lick of his Tootsie Pop before saying, “Fourteen-thirty.”

“Liaaaaaar!” Nancy said. “There’s no way. You’re lying.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself, Wheeler,” Billy said.

“That’s like...ninety-sixth percentile or something,” Nancy said.

“Yep. Eight-hundred verbal.”

“Hmm.” Nancy clicked her tongue. “Six-thirty math?”

“Fuck you,” Billy said. “My verbal is perfect.”

“Okay.” She looked so cocky.

Billy snorted and rolled his eyes. “Fine. What did you get?”

“I haven’t taken them yet.”

Aha , Billy thought with a sense of triumph.

“Right, “ Billy said. He plopped down on the edge of the bed. “Like you didn’t take PSATs?”

“That doesn’t count.”

“Oh shit,” Billy said. “What’s the damage?”

Nancy cleared her throat and said very quietly, “Twelve-hundred.”

“Oohohoho!” Billy barked a laugh, covering his mouth his fist. “Shit.”

“Hey...bite me,” Nancy said. “That’s what PSATs are for. And my math is still better than yours.”

“Ah... What’s your verbal then?” Billy said.

Nancy made a face and shook her head. “I freeze up during tests sometimes.”

“Like five hundred?” Billy laughed. “Four hundred?”

She punched his shoulder, laughing along with him. “It’s not four hundred, you asshole.” She gave him a long look. “So then where are you applying?”

“I’m not going to college,” Billy said lightly, and sucked on his Tootsie Pop. Some annoying part of his brain pointed out that he was having the most relaxed and easy conversation he’d with anybody in, he didn’t know how long, and it was with *Nancy Wheeler* of all people.

Nancy shook her head, her eyes wide with surprise. “*What ?* With scores like that-”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Billy said. “With scores like that I can have my pick. I don’t want to go to college.”

“Why? Is it a money thing?” Nancy said. “Because you could get scholarships, plus the athletic side-”

“*I know ,*” Billy said. “I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

Billy made a face. “Spend four years so a bunch of windbags can tell me what I just read? For ten grand a year or something? I don’t think so.”

Nancy laughed and shook her head, astonished. “Okay. But what about a career?”

“I don’t see myself doing the kinda job that would require college,” Billy said. He’d reached the tootsie part of the Tootsie Pop and he gnawed at it. He wondered how much Nancy had bugged Steve about school. Steve definitely wasn’t the academic type. “Is Harrington going to college?” He’d tried to make it sound casual and it ended up sounding forced-casual which was just plain forced.

Nancy didn’t tease him this time, she just said, “Doesn’t look like it.”

“Hmm.”

“Steve was never very intense about school,” Nancy said.

“No.” Billy found himself smiling fondly. He was too relaxed here. He was forgetting to cover. That was bad. But maybe it didn’t matter with Nancy?

“But,” Nancy said, “Steve is charming...whatever. And masochistically nice. Best looking guy in school?” She smiled at him, nudged his arm.

Fuck everything , Billy thought. His cheeks were burning. There was absolutely no reason he shouldn’t have taken off a long time ago. “Yeah, well, best looking before I showed up,” Billy rambled, chewing on the stick of his Tootsie Pop.

“Are you gay?” Nancy said.

Billy jumped to his feet. “What the *fuck* , Wheeler!”

“Hey!” Nancy put up her hands. “I wouldn’t tell anyone! Billy. Honestly. I...have way bigger secrets than that I’m keeping. It’s small potatoes.”

Billy had frozen up. If a guy had asked him he could just punch the dude; getting in trouble for fighting was a lot better than the other shit getting back to his father. But he didn’t have a ready comeback when being asked outright by a girl. It wasn’t like he could go hitting a girl. He was an asshole but he wasn’t *that* big of an asshole. There was probably a smooth way to get out of this but he couldn’t think of one. Up and leaving would just make it look worse.

“I didn’t sign up for this *Breakfast Club* shit,” Billy muttered.

“Kinda...sounds like a yes,” Nancy said.

Billy took a deep breath and pointed a finger. “If it got back to my father, I’d be fucking *dead* , I’m not kidding-”

“I won’t say a word,” Wheeler said, looking at him steadily. “I get it. This never happened.”

Billy stuck his dwindling Tootsie Pop stick in his mouth, chewing furiously.

"It must suck," Nancy said. "Going from California to a place like Hawkins when...ya know..."

"When you're a homo?" Billy said. "It does."

Nancy nodded and squinting at him over her Tootsie Pop she said, "You can smoke in here if you want."

Billy didn't waste any time trading his Tootsie Pop for a cigarette but opened her window to blow the smoke outside.

"You should use a volumizer," Nancy said.

"Huh?"

"On your hair," Nancy said. "You have really fine hair like mine and it's layered, which is good. But it could use more volume."

"At least my eyeliner's straight," Billy snapped, bristling.

"It was just an idea." Nancy stuck her Pop in her mouth only to take it back out. "You're wearing eyeliner?"

"Yeah, a little bit."

Nancy stood and walked up to him, tipping her head up to get a better look at him. She really was tiny, he noted. "Oh yeah... It looks good. It's subtle. Can you...show me?"

"You want me to show you how to do eyeliner," Billy said. "Why the hell would I do that?"

She looked disappointed and then immediately lit up a little. "Because...I'll tell you something good about Steve?"

Billy thrilled at that and didn't manage to completely cover his excitement. Nancy was too smart, he thought. He might as well take her up on it. "Alright."

"Yeah?" Nancy said. "When my mom shows me stuff like that, I just get impatient. It never ends well."

“Eh, Karen wears that shit a bit thick anyway,” Billy said.

“*Karen* ?” Nancy said.

Billy only chuckled and said, “Just get out the make-up?”

Minutes later, Nancy had her makeup stash spilled out on her bedspread, a pink and purple Caboodle overflowing with riches. Billy poked through it, perusing her shit. Nancy handed him a liquid eyeliner and he made a face.

“You can’t even do pencil yet, Wheeler,” Billy said. “Baby steps.”

“Fine,” she said, a little grumpily. “I guess you should show me on you first...?”

“Yeah yeah, let me wash this stuff off...”

She directed him to the bathroom and, grumbling, he washed off his eyeliner and the tiny bit of mascara he’d been wearing to make his already bright eyes pop a little. He poked through the Wheeler’s medicine cabinet and snorted at the mass amount of Preparation H he assumed belonged to Mr. Wheeler.

“Alright.” Billy took a breath. He’d taken off his jacket and buttoned up his shirt nearly to the top because it was chilly in Nancy’s room with the window open and now he hunched on the bed in front of a mirror clipped to her make-up case as she leaned into watch him. She handed him a few different liners and he picked out a thick black pencil.

“You’re trying to do it all in one line probably,” Billy said quietly. He closed one eye and raised the pencil.

“Shit, you’re left handed,” Nancy muttered, patting his arm. “Let me get on your other side.”

They rearranged themselves and Billy continued. “So not in one line...” He drew tiny little strokes close to his lash line as Nancy watched closely. “Just...a little at a time... And you can thicken it as

you go...And if you're gonna wear mascara, always do the liner first."

"This is really helpful," Nancy muttered, as she watched him. "Will you show me liquid too?"

Billy stopped and pursed his lips. "Mmm... you have to tell me another thing about Steve."

"No problem."

"Okay." Billy smirked and went back to his eyeliner. He frowned and held the pencil out to look at it. "This is good shit."

"Lancome," Nancy said.

"I just buy cheap stuff at the drugstore."

"I've got a bunch of em'," Nancy said. "My mom buys it all the time just for the gift bags. You can have a couple if you want."

"Yeah?" Billy nodded. "Thanks. So...hypothetically, what kind of volumizer are you talking about?"

"Are you serious?" Billy said later. He was smoking by the window again, Nancy trying out her newly learned eyeliner technique. The eyeliner lessons had taken a while. Somehow they'd ended up discussing *The Great Gatsby* in the middle of it. "Farrah Fawcett hairspray?"

"He's so secretive about it too," Nancy said, pressing her eyelid down. "Like it's the shame of his life."

"Ya know...he always fixes his hair after gym and shit," Billy said. "And he hides in the bathroom stall to do it."

"Well, now you know why."

"Farrah Fawcett spray," Billy said, shaking his head. "Oh my God."

Nancy laughed, probably at his reaction more than anything else.

“Hey,” Billy said. “I showed you how to do liquid. So what’s the second thing?”

“Right...” Nancy tapped her chin and grinned. “He had braces. In middle-school.”

Billy took a drag. “Lots of kids have braces. Not very juicy.”

Nancy smiled slyly and said, “There was... *headgear* .”

Billy’s mouth dropped open. “Headgear? Are you serious?”

“Oh yeah,” Nancy said. “There are pictures. Not that he hasn’t tried to destroy them all.”

“Jesus Christ.” Billy couldn’t even explain to himself why the thought made him giddy or why he found it so fucking endearing that King Steve Harrington had once worn headgear and was embarrassed about it.

“He still has to wear a retainer to bed,” Nancy said.

Billy snorted a laugh. “That’s *gold* .”

“You really like him,” Nancy said. She wasn’t teasing. She said it matter of factly.

Billy sucked on his cigarette and looked away out the window. “He’s a dope.”

“Yeah,” Nancy agreed. “And you really like him.”

“Ya know, I should get going,” Billy said. It was too personal and it was making him...edgy. Things had been nice, but there was only so much he could take.

Nancy said, “Hey, I didn’t mean-”

“No, it’s...” He shook his head. “Whatever. Don’t sweat it.”

“One more thing!” Nancy said, hopping to her feet. She grabbed a book off a shelf. “*Have* you read any Flannery O’Connor?”

Billy frowned at the paperback copy of *Wise Blood* she was handing him. He stuck his cigarette in his mouth and took it from her. "Couple short stories last year. Southern gothic chick. Kinda fucked up?"

"Yeah," Nancy said. "I read it and it's on my final. But my brain is scrambled, I'm totally lost. If you can help me with that, I'll give you something really good about Steve."

"Yeah?" Billy mumbled around his cigarette. "Got yourself a deal."

"Okay," Nancy said. "But don't just go reading *Cliffs Notes* or something."

"*Cliffs Notes* are for pussies," Billy sneered, and stuck the book in his back pocket. He grabbed the eyeliners she'd given him and his jacket and paused at her door.

"Um... You're okay, Wheeler."

She tossed him a nod. "See ya at school."

"Yeah, *vaya con dios*."

Billy stomped down the stairs and catching Karen Wheeler out of the corner of his eye as he headed to the door, he only tossed her a wave and said, "Later, Mrs. Wheeler!"

At four o'clock on Friday, Steve was leaning against his car in the school parking lot, and trying to decide what the hell to do with himself. There had been a long period of feeling abjectly lost and lonely following the break-up but he'd found himself eventually retiring his sad mixtapes. It wasn't so much the lack of Nancy in particular any more as much as the lack of ...anyone.

I have no friends, he thought, feeling pathetic. It hadn't much mattered when he'd been with Nancy but now he felt like he'd fucked up not rebuilding some manner of social life (beyond middle-schoolers) following his rift with assholes like Tommy H.

If he didn't decide what to do with himself soon-

“Steve!”

Too late.

Dustin Henderson came bounding up from the middle-school, his cap nearly flying off his head. Mrs.Henderson’s car was packed with nerds, parked nearby, the engine running as she waited for Dustin. Steve tossed Mrs. Henderson a little wave.

“Hey, Steve! Do you want to play D&D tonight?”

Steve slipped on his Ray-Bans and glanced around just to make sure no one had overheard a thirteen-year-old asking him if he wanted to play Dungeons and Dragons on a Friday night in a tone that implied the answer could very well be yes.

He hated that he was on the verge of saying yes and that it really wouldn’t be that bad of an evening by his own new bizarre standards. It would be better than hanging around his house by himself.

Just as Steve was opening his mouth, Jonathan came sidling up and said, “Hey, sorry, Dustin. Steve’s hanging with me tonight? Remember, Steve? And I don’t have my car.”

“I am?” Steve said. “I mean, yeah. Sorry. Forgot. I’m hanging out with Jonathan.”

“Yeah.” Jonathan stood next to Steve and nudged his arm. “I got some...stuff.”

Steve’s ears perked up. “Oh...stuff? Okay. Yeah...”

Dustin was glaring at them. “What are you talking about?” Dustin said. “Are you talking about drugs? Steve, is he talking about drugs?”

“Of course not,” Steve said, and pushed his shades down his nose as he pointed at Dustin. “Just say *no* , Dustin. C’mon, Byers.”

Once in the sanctity of his car, Steve laughed and shook his head. “Thanks, dude. You’re like the fairy godmother of marijuana.”

“Heh. Yeah, well I know you love those guys,” Jonathan said. “But

you looked like you needed some rescuing.”

“Oh my God,” Steve muttered. “If I have to hear about the difference between a paladin and a bard again, I’m going to shoot myself.” He pulled out onto the road and paused at the parking lot exit. “We going to your place?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jonathan said. “I hope it’s not weird? Us hanging out?”

“Nah,” Steve said. Even though, maybe it was. He pulled out onto the road in the direction of the Byers. “I think I’m...good. As far as that goes.” It was awkward for a minute but Jonathan just nodded and then it wasn’t. Steve opted not to tell Jonathan that part of the reason he was feeling like he’d moved on from Nancy was because he’d had a wet dream about Billy Hargrove weeks ago that had thrown him into a tailspin. If he was honest with himself, it wasn’t the first time he’d thought about Billy Hargrove that way.

Jonathan didn’t need to know *everything* .

“You want to pick up some food?” Steve said. “I get crazy munchies when I smoke.”

“Yeah sure, um...” Jonathan started to reach for his wallet, looking worried, and Steve waved a hand.

“I got it, man,” Steve said. “You’re sharing your shit and all. Dairy Queen?”

“Yeah. Perfect. Thanks.”

Steve bought enough food to feed the Byers for a week. He was a little surprised at just how delighted he was at the evening going this way. Delight had been in short supply lately so Steve decided to run with it and fuck everything else.

“Your mom’s not home, I assume,” Steve said, following Jonathan to his front door, his arms full of DQ bags.

Jonathan balanced a tray of blizzards on his knee and unlocked the door. “Nah, she’s with Chief Hopper tonight. They’ve been hanging out a lot lately.”

“Interesting,” Steve said.

“Yeah...” Jonathan gave Steve a sly little look as they went in. “It’s kinda weird. She seems happier though. Which is nice, after Bob and everything. I think they’re just friends? But it’s good.”

In Jonathan’s room they set the food out on his desk and Steve said, “You a little worried about having a cop for a dad someday?” He nodded at the bag of weed Jonathan was now holding between his fingers. “Could get dicey.”

“I mean...it’s Hopper,” Jonathan said with a shrug.

Steve laughed at that. “Yeah. It’s Hopper.”

Jonathan held up a record and said, “How do you feel about Lou Reed?”

“No particular way. It’s cool.”

“Okay. *Transformer* it is.” Jonathan put on the record and bopped to it for a minute and Steve plopped down onto Jonathan’s desk chair and nibbled on fries. “I think...” Jonathan shook his bag of weed. “Let’s do a pipe. Hold on...”

Steve swiveled around and surveyed the room. He’d only ever been to the Byers when there was crazy shit happening. It almost seemed like a totally different house without flashing Christmas lights and monsters. He nodded to the music, scoping the movies posters and the crates of albums, the messy artsy poorness of it. It had personality though. His own room was barren of personality. It was like a mannequin lived in his bedroom. He wondered what that meant about him.

He wondered what Billy Hargrove’s room looked like and then felt like an idiot.

Jonathan came back with an apple and a Bic pen and sat on the bed and Steve watched him turn it into a pipe with an impressive amount of skill and rapidity.

“Huh,” Steve said. “It’s like you’re assembling a rifle.”

“Heheh.” Jonathan nodded. “I’ve had practice. I wouldn’t be able to afford it usually but Keith’s brother gets me a good deal.”

“Keith?” Steve said.

“He works at the arcade?” Jonathan said.

“Ah.”

Jonathan packed up his apple with weed and produced a lighter. Steve watched him take a hit and hold it, handing it over to Steve. Steve had not used an apple pipe before and he hesitated, raising an eyebrow. He lit the little bowl scooped out of the top and inhaled until Jonathan laughed, blowing smoke.

“Jesus, Steve, that’s a big hit,” Jonathan said.

Steve held the hit, heroically failing to cough and binked. “Oh?” Speaking made him cough and a massive cloud of smoke billowed from his mouth. He leaned over, fit to hack out a lung and Jonathan chuckled, slapping his back. Steve wheezed, “I’m not used to pipes.”

“You’ll get it,” Jonathan said.

Steve grabbed a bag of burgers off the desk and took one out. “What’re you stuck with me for anyway?” Steve said, taking too big of a bite. “What’s Nance doin’?”

“Study date,” Jonathan said, still holding his smoke. He let it out and tipped his head back and forth to some song about being...a bear? Steve wasn’t sure and the weed was starting to hit him. He ate half of his burger and took a another hit, more carefully this time. Jonathan grabbed the burger bag and attacked a chicken sandwich with gusto and Steve concentrated on the song playing. It seemed overly complicated.

“I never have study dates,” Steve muttered. “I should have study dates.”

Jonathan stood and swayed to the music while eating his burger. “You never study,” he said.

“That’s also true.”

Jonathan swallowed the last of his chicken sandwich and crumpled up the wrapper, tossing it in a trashcan. “You wouldn’t want this study date anyway.” He grabbed the apple and lighter off the bed and took a small hit.

Steve nodded and didn’t think to ask what Jonathan was talking about. “This song is sad.”

“Perfect Day?” Jonathan said. “It’s a happy song. I mean...kind of.”

“It sounds sad,” Steve said, frowning and staring intensely out the window. He thought of Billy’s Camaro roaring up to the Byers that night.

“That’s because you’re high, Steve.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m right about this.” It was pretty though, and he nodded along and took the apple Jonathan handed him. Jonathan lit the bowl and Steve took a little hit. “I need a blizzard.” Jonathan handed him a blizzard.

“It’s about Lou Reed and his wife hanging out in Central Park,” Jonathan said.

“That sounds nice,” Steve said. “Song still sounds sad to me. Are you gonna go to NYU?”

“Looks like!” Jonathan grabbed the apple and sat on the one cleared spot atop his desk, swinging his legs.

“Is Nancy going to go to NYU?” Steve said.

“I dunno yet,” Jonathan said. “That would be...” He took a hit. “Really cool.”

“Then you could go to Central Park like Lou Reed,” Steve said.

“I’m pretty sure lots of people go to Central Park,” Jonathan said. “Not like...just Lou Reed.”

“No, it’s just Lou Reed,” Steve said. “And his wife.”

“Well...I don’t think he’s married to that girl anymore.”

“I knew it was a sad song,” Steve said wisely. He stood up for no reason and stood there dumbly for a minute and sat on the bed.

“You’re fuckin’ high, man.”

“Naaaah.”

“Well, Nance can go wherever she wants practically,” Jonathan said, sipping a blizzard. “She’s tutoring a senior right now even.”

“Who?” Steve said. He sucked on his blizzard straw and the cup was empty. The croak of the blizzard dregs in the straw seemed hypnotic, too loud in his ear.

“Billy Hargrove,” Jonathan said, kicking his desk with his heels.

Steve stopped sucking on his straw and said, “What?”

“Hargrove,” Jonathan said. “He never took some test... AP English. Yeah. AP English. Junior year. So she’s helping him out.”

Steve suddenly noticed the record spinning on the hifi two feet away and he shook his head slowly, following the spin. “Billy Hargrove,” Steve muttered. “That’s weird.”

“I know,” Jonathan said. “Who knew that guy took AP classes?”

“No...” Steve sighed. “He’s really smart. He takes AP English, Government, Chem...”

Jonathan blinked at him. “Wow.”

“I only have him in Trig and study hall,” Steve said sullenly. He chewed on his straw, watching the record spin. “And ya know...basketball.”

“Uh huh.”

“He’s really smart,” Steve said. “He’s over there right now? At the

Wheeler?”

“In a bit, I think,” Jonathan said, glancing at his alarm clock.

“You’re...cool with that?” Steve said. “He’s supposed to be kind of a lady killer.” He grimaced at his empty blizzard cup.

“I trust Nancy,” Jonathan said with a shrug and then sputtered, “Oh. Man. I’m sorry. Like...sorry, man.”

Steve shrugged. “That’s alright.”

“Is it though?” Jonathan said, looking very sheepish.

“You love who you love right?”

“Yeah.”

“I dunno. I... Lemme have a hit?” Steve grabbed the apple and the lighter from Jonathan and took way too big of a hit, speaking as he held his smoke. “I was really fucking gutted- hooooo....” Smoke billowed. “For a while there, about Nance,” Steve said. “But then just like... Now it’s just..like... There’s this whole other thing.”

“What other thing?” Jonathan said, going for another chicken sandwich.

“There’s just this...” He shook his head. “Person. And it’s...stupid.”

“You like somebody?” Jonathan said, perking up. “That’s good! Who is it?”

“It’s not good,” Steve said glumly. “It’s stupid.”

“Why?” Jonathan said. “How is it stupid?”

“Because they’re just... I mean of all the people I could... I dunno what’s wrong with me.”

“Steve.” Jonathan hopped down from his desk and sat next to him on the bed. “What is it?”

“Okay,” Steve said. “I’m out of my brain right now. So I’ll tell you.”

“Okay.”

“Do you remember like...with the fight. You and I. We had the fight and I said that, before you punched my lights out, right, I said I’d always thought you were a queer?”

Jonathan flinched at that. “Ah, yeah. I think I remember that.”

“Well...” Steve said. “You’re gonna love this.”

“Oh my God,” Jonathan said. “Who do you like?”

“It’s, well...” Steve was floating somewhere up above Hawkins, feeling as if he were looking down on this conversation. He might have shouted down to himself that he shouldn’t tell Jonathan Byers he had a big dumb crush on Billy Hargrove but the Steve down on the ground would not have heard him. “A dude. It’s a dude. Who I like. A...guy person.”

“Whooooa.” Jonathan nodded. “Huh.”

“Yeah. Whoa.”

“Is that, I mean, for you is that...?” Jonathan made confused hand gestures.

“Yeah, I’ve thought about guys before,” Steve muttered. “If that’s what you’re asking.”

“Oh,” Jonathan said. “It’s funny. Ya know. Because, everyone always thinks I’m... And now you...”

“Yep.”

“Irony,” Jonathan said.

Steve squinted and relaxed into the high. “Yeah. Sure. Definitely.”

“Well I, ya know... That’s great, man.” Jonathan patted his shoulder.

“Why is it great?” Steve said. “Doesn’t feel great. There’s no way he’s into guys too. Although, shit, he sure likes to fuck with me like he

does.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s always...” Steve put on a low imitation of Billy Hargrove. “‘Heeeey, pretty boy. Lookin’ good today, Harrington. Lookin’ sharp today, Harrington, gettin’ me goin’.’ And he’s always, ya know... leering. And staring. And winking.” Steve sank his head in his hands. “In the *shower* . Ugh. I can’t even handle it, man.”

“Well... okay.” Jonathan took a hit off the apple and said. “I would say it sounds like Hargrove wants to jump you really bad.”

“What!” Steve’s head snapped up. “I didn’t say... Wait... Did I say it was Hargrove?”

“Uh...technically no,” Jonathan said. “But like...I go to school there too, Steve.”

Steve fell back on the bed with an air of melodrama and threw his hands up. He stared at them, raised over his head. They looked *weird* . “Okay. But. He wouldn’t say shit like that if he was actually into me. Nobody does that.”

“Maybe it’s...” Jonathan waved a french fry. “Maybe it’s like it’s so over the top, he knows nobody would think it’s for real. Ya know? Like a counter strategy.”

“What’s the point of that?” Steve said.

“Well, how do you usually react when he does that shit?” Jonathan said.

“Like an idiot probably.”

“Okay, so..” Jonathan waved his fry around. “You never teased a girl because you thought it was cute when she got flustered? I mean... I never did. But you were all over that, right?”

Steve frowned and blinked, listening to the music playing. “Oh. It’s ‘Walk on the Wild Side.’” He sat up and nodded along. “Hey baaabe...take a walk on the wild side...”

“Steve.” Jonathan snapped his fingers. “Focus. He’s paying you all this attention. Maybe it means something.”

“Why are you trying to match me up with Hargrove?” Steve said, gazing down from the apple pipe clouds. “S’like you’re Yente and I’m Tzeitel over here.”

Jonathan just stared at him. “What?”

“ *Fiddler on the Roof* ,” Steve said. “My mom loves *Fiddler* . She plays it constantly. She also saw *Yentl* three times. I think she thinks she’s Jewish. But...she’s not, man. God, does she love Barbra Streisand.”

“Steve.”

“Who, day and night, must scramble for a living...” Steve sang faintly. “Feed a wife and children, say his daily prayers-”

“ *Steve* . ”

“The papaaaaa! The papa! Dah nah nah nah! *Tradition* !”

“STEVE.”

“Huh?”

“Did you ever tease a girl because you liked when she got flustered?”

“My M.O. was to act like I didn’t give a shit.”

“That’s...” Jonathan smiled tightly. “Very smooth.”

“Yeah, it’s worked out great. Just look at me now.”

“Well.” Jonathan sighed. “Maybe he doesn’t like you, maybe he’s messing with you. But that could be for the best. Isn’t he kind of a dick?”

“Yeah, but he’s mellowed since he first got here. He even said he was sorry for the whole...thing. I thought he was gonna bust out crying. He’s funny,” Steve said to the ceiling. “And he’s so smart. I like smart people. I mean I don’t like feeling stupid but... I like to ask em’

questions I don't know the answer to and just listen to them talk. Especially if they're hot. I'd love to hear Billy just...babble about ya know...books or something. Whatever. I think it's sexy." He heard Jonathan snort and said, "You're laughing at me."

"Nance said you used to ask her dumb questions all the time." Jonathan grinned, his shoulders hunched. "Just what she said."

"Great," Steve said flatly.

"Sounds like you like him a lot."

"He has really pretty eyes. And his..." Steve sighed, clapping his hands to his cheeks. "Oh my God, his body is *ridiculous*."

"Oh...boy."

"It is, alright? That's just a fact."

"Okay," Jonathan said, looking shifty.

"He looks like that statue, ya know. David. That one. Except his dick is bigger. Why do those statues always have tiny dicks?"

"Um."

"He's *gorgeous*."

"Okay."

"Listen, you're dating my ex," Steve said. "That means you give me weed and listen to me talk about Billy Hargrove being hot as hell."

"Wow. Is that what that means?"

"Yep."

"I am learning a lot about you today."

"Yeah, probably too much."

"It's cool, man."

"He's so pretty," Steve said sighing. "Every time I see his ass walking down the hall I want to just slip my hand in his back pocket."

"Jesus Christ, Steve."

"Well, you're not going to tell anyone, right?"

"Of course, not."

"That's good. You're a really good friend, Byers."

"I would not have expected you to say that ever," Jonathan said, and smiled.

"But here we are." Steve laughed. "Wow. I feel great. And really high. It's kinda nice getting it off my chest."

"Yeah, I'm sure," Jonathan said.

"Did I mention how pretty his mouth is?"

"Oh boy."

On Monday Steve went to school in a haze of Billy Hargrove thoughts. It had been one thing when it was all in his own head, but spilling it out to Jonathan made it *real*. When he thought back to how graphically he'd described his feelings to not just another guy, but to his ex's boyfriend, he felt like an idiot. He supposed he should be grateful that Jonathan was Jonathan. He was probably the least judgemental person in Hawkins on that score. He was thinking about this as he loitered at his locker before class and hearing the sound of Nancy's laughter he turned his head and saw something that made his stomach plummet down to his Adidas.

Nancy was laughing at something *Billy* was saying. He was standing by her locker, her hand on his shoulder. Steve couldn't hear the conversation as they talked in low voices in the middle of the usual corridor hubbub. For a moment Steve thought he might have walked into a different kind of Upside Down. In what universe was it normal for Nancy Wheeler to be chatting with Billy Hargrove, the two looking chummy and comfy like this happened everyday.

“Hey, man.” Jonathan came up next to Steve, who barely heard him as he glared at Billy and Nancy. “You alright?”

“Are you seeing this?” Steve nodded over at Billy and Nancy and Jonathan followed his gaze.

“Huh.” Jonathan observed the sight with no perceivable emotional response. “That’s funny.”

“Funny?” Steve said. He felt a kind of heat up around his ears. “Look at them! I’ve never even seen him smile like that before!”

He wasn’t exaggerating. Billy looked relaxed in a way that changed his whole face. He was smiling down at Nancy, carefree and cheerful, clutching his books. His eyes sparkled and crinkled in a way that Steve would think was adorable if he wasn’t so pissed.

“Okay,” Jonathan said. “Well...”

“He’s into her,” Steve said.

Jonathan said, “That...might be a leap. She doesn’t seem like his type.”

“How do you know what his type is?” Steve said, practically shouting.

“Steve, man. Chill.”

“Hey, I’m chill but...” Steve gestured emphatically. “That’s your woman. You gotta take care of this.”

“My woman?” Jonathan said, almost choking on it.

“Nancy’s fickle, right?” Steve said. “We both know that. You don’t know what could happen! Mr. Bedroom Eyes from California sweeps in and before you know it-”

“You’re freaking out.”

“I’m not freaking out,” Steve insisted. “But I’d rather she be with you than him, ya know.”

"I'm sure that's true."

"That's not what I mean."

"It's not?" Jonathan said. He slapped Steve on the back. "It'll be fine, man."

"Fix it!" Steve said, and stormed off in the opposite direction of Billy and Nancy still giggling as if they'd been friends for years.

"Steve?" Jonathan called after him.

"Fix it!"

Steve did not chill out. Steve thought about the implications of Billy Hargrove possibly liking Nancy Wheeler for the next couple of periods. His third period was Trig. Steve had Billy in Trig. He arrived there before Billy, tapping his pencil, glaring at the door. When Billy swaggered in with his tight jeans and his open shirt, Steve huffed through his nose. Billy's eyes flitted about the room and settled on Steve in the second row. He winked as he walked by.

"Hey, hot stuff," Billy said, ever so casual.

Generally, Steve just ignored these comments and rolled his eyes, figuring it was all part of Billy's continued determination to psych him out in some way. But he'd been jerking it to Billy for what felt like forever at this point and now he'd gone and put words to what had become something more than a fleeting fantasy, only to be faced with a kind of double rejection; Billy and *Nancy* .

"Hey, sexy," Steve said, his eyes fixed on Billy. He nodded at Hargrove, who stumbled for moment on the way to his desk, astonishment coloring his face.

A couple people had heard them and Steve saw eyebrows raise. There was a kind of assumption though that nobody like either Steve or Billy could be into dudes. Steve felt it like some unspoken agreement at school. The "queers" were people like Jonathan. There was a safety in it, as backwards as it was. Steve could probably kiss Billy in front of God and everybody and people would just laugh and then turn around and call Jonathan Byers a "homo." Steve thought about that

in Trig and found it annoyed him on his own behalf as well as Jonathan's. Maybe that was what Jonathan meant by Billy being so over the top. He could flirt as much as he liked because nobody would take it seriously. And it wasn't serious. Because Billy clearly liked Nancy. Steve's pencil had been flipping around in his hand and now he lost the rhythm and it flipped backward. Somebody sounded a soft "ow" and Steve turned half around in his desk about to apologize. He saw Chelsea Cohen holding the pencil while rubbing her arm and Billy Hargrove next to her, leaning over and whispering furiously as he grabbed for it. He heard her confused murmur in reply and then Billy was prying her fingers apart, releasing the pencil from her grasp with a pleased little smile and sitting back at his desk, knees spread in his usual space-hogging posture of don't-give-a-fuck. Billy looked up and, seeing that Steve was already watching him, went a bit pink. But he licked his lips, hunching forward, proffering the pencil.

"Drop something, Harrington?" Billy said.

Steve twisted around, hand out to take the pencil, and Billy moved it just out of reach at the last second, a smile curling up on his lips.

"Are you serious?" Steve said. "You need a pencil, Hargrove? You can keep it."

"I couldn't do that," Billy said in a low voice. "It's yours. Sorry, buddy. Here, take it."

Feeling like he'd already lost, Steve went for the pencil again and Billy did not move, but he did not give it up either, his fingers gripping like iron around the thin bit of wood, his eyes fixed on Steve's. Steve determined not to look away and his hand covered Billy's. He attempted to ignore Billy's warm skin under his palm, the cords of Billy's veins under his fingers as Billy stared at him while he tried to wrench his pencil from Billy's clutches.

"What are you?" Steve said. "Twelve?"

"You have soft hands, Harrington," Billy said, and all at once his grip relaxed and Steve took the pencil back.

Steve turned back around, flushed and dazed, and wondered if Billy's expression, which had been a little too serious rather than mocking, was only in his imagination.

At lunch the situation only became worse when Steve spotted Billy sitting at *his* table, across from Nancy and Jonathan. Billy had no lunch, a paperback in front of him. He kept tapping the book as he spoke to Nancy, looking emphatic about whatever point he was making. Nancy nodded, her brows furrowed. Jonathan just sat there as if there was nothing weird about this at all. Steve stood in the lunch line, distractedly loading up his tray as he glanced back at the table. By the time he was done, he had way too much food. The only open seat was next to Billy and Steve sat down with an unceremonious thunk.

"Harrington," Billy said, smiling widely.

"What're you doing over here?" Steve said, going for casual. He tipped his head in the direction of Tommy's table. "Don't your toadies miss their leader?"

"I think they'll manage," Billy said. "Besides, I'm helping Wheeler."

"With what?"

"Flannery O'Connor," Billy said, holding up the book. "*Wise Blood*."

Steve angrily dug into his chocolate pudding cup. "Yeah? I thought she was helping you."

Nancy said, "Things took a turn." She looked a little sneaky, smiling at Billy. "Several turns actually."

Steve watched Billy's startled reaction to that and shot a glare at Jonathan who only shrugged.

Everything was uncomfortably tense and Jonathan said, "Uh... So what's the book about?"

"Eh, free will," Billy said. "Destiny. Inevitability of belief... That kinda shit."

Steve's neck felt hot. His hips was squeezed up against Billy's on the bench and Billy was talking about books and using terms like "inevitability of belief" and there was something about the juxtaposition of that with Billy's metal as hell hair and his shiny earring and his glittering dangerous eyes that threatened to make Steve get hard.

"Inevitability of belief?" Steve murmured around his spoon. He licked a dollop of pudding. Billy was watching him.

"Mmm hmm," Billy said. "This guy's trying to separate himself from God but he can't so..." Billy tongue made his appearance and he bit his bottom lip. He was talking so low Steve had to lean in a little to hear. Across from them Nancy and Jonathan discussed Yearbook. "Destiny. Lot of religious themes and shit."

"You believe in God?" Steve said, genuinely curious.

"I try not to," Billy said. "You believe in destiny, Harrington?"

"I try not to," Steve said, feeling very smooth.

"Hey, you guys," Nancy said. "I was thinking we should hang out this weekend. Maybe go play putt-putt or something?"

"Putt-putt?" Steve said. There was a miniature golf course the next town over. Steve had a little weakness for it as he'd been going there since he could remember.

"Putt-putt," Billy said. "What, like mini-golf? Wheeler, come on."

"Wait, he's invited?" Steve said, nodding at Billy.

"Yes, he's invited," Nancy said. "And he's going. You're going." Her eyebrows shot up at Billy and she pursed her lips; the stubborn Nancy expression; it was a thing to be feared. "You're also going to college."

"Fuck, Wheeler. Would you lay off?" But Billy didn't even look mad like Steve might've expected to him. He looked almost pleased by the nagging. Some smarter part of Steve thought that it was nice because Billy Hargrove probably needed a good friend who cared about things like whether or not he went college. Another more reptilian part of

Steve was certain Billy was into Nancy and it made him so jealous that he wanted to punch the table.

“Yep, you’re going to college,” Nancy said. “But we’ll talk about that later. First, putt-putt.”

Billy said. “Great. Let’s play fucking miniature golf.”

Steve looked to Jonathan and tried to say “FIX IT” with his eyes.

Jonathan said, “Sounds good. I like putt-putt.”

Steve snorted and stabbed at his pudding with a spoon.

“Did it do something to offend you?” Billy said. He was chewing on his thumbnail as he stared at Steve.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “You have lunch or are you just eating your fingernails?”

Billy’s hand jerked away from his mouth, hiding under the table. “Spent my cash on smokes.”

Steve heaved a sigh and slid him an extra pudding cup, a bag of chips, and an apple. “Don’t want you to go passing out in practice,” Steve grumbled. “We need the offense.”

“Why thanks, Harrington.” Billy kept his eyes on Steve as he bit into his apple, a drip of juice sliding down his chin. Steve glared into his spaghetti and stabbed a meatball.

I’m not going to survive this , Steve thought.

The week was long and became no less confusing. Everytime Steve turned around there Billy was having some private conversation with Nancy, smiling that genuine relaxed smile, talking about whatever private secret thing it was he shared with her. Or anyway it seemed that way to Steve. Sometimes Nancy was talking to Jonathan, and when Billy wasn’t talking to Nancy or in class, he was all over Steve, his flirtatiousness only increasing. That wasn’t so bad. Steve had become used to it, even though it made him hot. He wasn’t so used to

Billy's new habit of lecturing. Maybe lecturing was the wrong word. Billy would lean up against Steve's locker and suddenly start talking about some historical thing he'd just learned, or the branches of government. He looked right at Steve as he spoke in low seductive tones. Steve didn't even want to think about why this was happening but he couldn't stop himself spurring it on, rattling off random questions, some of which he actually knew the answer too, just to hear Billy talk. It didn't help when Billy's eyes were bright enough to leap right out of his head. He was wearing makeup or something. Steve wanted to push him against the wall and feel what that muscled back was like under his hands, what that never still mouth would be like under his, what Billy's eyelashes looked like when they fluttered as Steve licked that little spot under his ear.

But that wasn't going to happen.

Because Billy liked Nancy.

On Saturday Steve took almost an hour deciding what to wear and defaulted to a blue polo and jeans. It was warm enough not to need a jacket and it almost felt like summer as he traipsed outside, expecting to see Jonathan's car and expecting to suggest they leave it here and switch to the Beemer. But it wasn't Jonathan's car, it was the Camaro, and Steve watched Nancy hop out of the front seat and crawl into the back with Jonathan.

Steve got in the car and felt a little light-headed, surrounded by Billy's scent of cigarettes and cologne and the warm dinginess of the Camaro. Billy smirked under his aviators and tossed Steve a nod as he peeled out, almost before Steve had shut his door.

"What's up, buttercup?" Billy said.

"Why do you say that shit?" Steve blurted, already having been on edge for a solid week, even if they were something like friends it seemed.

"I believe in free will," Billy cracked. "That good enough for you?"

Steve rolled his eyes and said, "Whatever you say, angel face."

Billy seemed to like that and he grinned the rest of the way, tapping

his fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of Ted Nugent.

The ride out to Blue Castle Family Fun Center was nice. Billy rolled the window halfway down and wind messed up Steve's hair but it was hard to care as he smoked and watched Billy bopping to his music, occasionally smiling at Steve as if they shared a secret. There was something so pleasantly ordinary about it; going to mini-golf with his friends on a sunny day. He stuck his hand out the window and waved his fingers through the gusts of cool wind as Billy drove way too fast.

Steve noticed that Nancy and Jonathan made out in the backseat nearly the whole way and Billy didn't seem particularly bothered by that. He was starting to wonder if he'd been wrong after all.

"Wheeler!" Billy said as they parked. "Byers! We're here! You guys know the stats on teen pregnancy these days? Might want to cool it."

Nancy and Jonathan finally became detached. Steve got out and Nancy and Jonathan exited looking slightly embarrassed as they wiped their mouths and straightened their clothes. Steve hung back to walk with Billy as they headed up to the entrance. Billy was wearing a white shirt, his chest on full display and in the sun he looked like some fucked up angel.

Fucking angel face alright , Steve thought.

Billy nudged Steve as they walked.

"That doesn't bother you?" Billy said, nodding up ahead at Nancy and Jonathan.

"What doesn't bother me?" Steve said.

"Your girl with Byers?" Billy said, as if Steve must be stupid.

"Not my girl anymore," Steve said. "Does it bother you?"

"Me?" Billy face twisted up in abject bafflement.

"I thought maybe you liked Nancy."

He snorted at that. "Ah, no. Harrington, no. Not my type. She's a tough chick though. Tougher than she looks."

"Yeah, no shit."

"I called her a bitch and she threatened to shoot me. And I *believed* her."

"You should," Steve said. "So what? You don't like brunettes? What's your type?"

"Oh, I like brunettes," Billy said. "Tall athletic ones."

"Hmm."

"With doe eyes," Billy said, grinning with bright white teeth.

Steve's heart started pounding. He was dense, but he wasn't *that* dense. "Oh," he said, and prayed it wasn't all bullshit.

"So you're over her?" Billy said.

"Apparently, I'm *very* over her."

"Yeah? What's that mean?"

Steve, high on sunshine and Billy's eyes said, "Wouldn't you like to know?" And he jogged up ahead, smacking Jonathan on the shoulder as they walked through the front gates. Steve threw money at Nancy, accustomed to paying for things, and she went up to buy them a game. He saw Billy hanging back to smoke and tugged on Jonathan's Clash t-shirt, pulling him aside.

"Dude," Steve said. "I think something's happening."

"With Billy?"

"Yeah, what do I do?"

"You're asking *me*?"

"Well, who else am I gonna ask?"

“Not me?”

“ *Byers* . He keeps flirting!”

“Then...flirt back? Sounds like you’re on your way.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, rapidly nodding his head. “Flirt back. Okay. Thanks.”

“Glad I could help?” Jonathan said, and looked like he was stifling a laugh.

“I’m going to kick your ass, ya know,” Billy said, as they waited at the first hole. They were sharing a club and Steve rubbed the shaft between his hands trying not to think dirty thoughts which wasn’t easy with how close Billy was standing to him.

“You’re delusional,” Steve said easily. “I’ve been coming here since I was four.”

“That’s very sad. But I’m still going to kick your ass.”

“You want to make it interesting?” Steve said.

“Oh, like it would really hurt if you had to give me ten bucks or something, moneybags,” Billy said.

“That’s not the point! Just bet me...three cigarettes,” Steve said off the top of his head. “But if I lose I’ll have to buy you a whole pack.”

“You’re on,” Billy said.

Steve nudged Billy’s hip with the golf club and didn’t miss the way Billy’s eyes roved over him. It was distracting, as was Billy’s ass in his jeans whenever he was about to take a swing. By the fourth hole, Steve was already three under par and Billy four over. They were waiting for a couple slowpokes to play through and they chatted and Steve fidgeted with the club and flexed his biceps just out of a nervous habit and pushed back his hair, feeling the tension continually rising. He hit his ball and waited for Jonathan and Nancy

as Billy stepped away, leaning against a high snack table on the walkway to smoke. Finally it was Billy's turn, Nancy and Jonathan already down the steps at the continuation of the hole, on the other side of a bright green T-rex.

"Hey, blondie," Steve said, and watched Billy slowly turn around. "You're up." Steve reached out with his golf club and hooked the clubhead over the V of Billy's mostly unbuttoned shirt. He bit his lip and tugged gently and Billy smirked around his cigarette, holding the shaft, letting himself be pulled forward until he was standing in front of Steve.

"You rang?" Billy said.

"You can't putt for shit, you know," Steve said, and feeling bold he took the cigarette out of Billy's mouth and stuck it between his own lips to take a drag.

"I..." Billy's mouth open and closed a couple times. He looked slightly lost. "I putt just fine, Harrington."

Steve pressed the club to Billy's chest. "Yeah? Show me."

Steve finished off the cigarette and watched Billy take his stance, holding the club with his usual iron grip.

"Why are you trying to murder the club?" Steve said.

Billy huffed and threw his head back. " *What* are you talking about?"

"Can I just show you something?" Steve said, and didn't wait for an answer. Billy was still gripping his club and Steve walked over and clutched Billy's upper arms. "Yeah, you're flexing. You don't need to flex to putt for Christ's sake." He squeezed Billy's biceps as if to force them to loosen, resolutely ignoring the way Billy was gazing at him as he worked his way down to Billy's forearms. "Relax," Steve said.

"I'm plenty relaxed," Billy mumbled.

"Doesn't feel like it." He put his hands over Billy's wrists. "You gotta death grip. Loosen up, loosen, loosen..." Billy complied and Steve nodded and moved Billy's hands slightly, arranging his fingers and

thumbs, luxuriating in Billy's hands once again. "Palms facing each other, line the shaft up with your lifeline..." He pressed his finger along Billy's left lifeline up to his pulse point and heard him catch his breath. "It's not a game of strength, ya know."

"Um...yeah. Right."

"Stand up straight a second," Steve said. He walked behind Billy and set his hands at Billy's hips, nudging him to shift slightly, pressing a knee to the back of his thigh to make him move. "Parallel to the..yeah." He was pressed up against Billy's back and felt his chest rising and falling. He tried to ignore his own growing erection and said softly in Billy's ear. "Don't look at the ball. Look at the hole."

"Uh...uh huh."

"Be gentle."

"Hmm."

Steve stepped back and said, "Okay, go ahead."

Steve watched Billy make a shaky putt that barely made it through the mouth of a plaster triceratops and stifled a laugh.

"You sabotaged me!" Billy said, spinning around as the ball made its way through the triceratops and down the tail of the T-Rex. Billy's eyes were bright. He pointed at Steve with the club and pressed it to Steve's chest. "Fucker."

"I dunno what you're talking about?" Steve said, and grabbed the clubhead. "What do you mean sabotage? Were you *distracted* or something?"

Billy ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. Steve followed Billy down the short set of steps, nudging him hard and nearly making him fall over the rail. "Jesus, Harrington!" He grinned at Steve who saw a flash of that very relaxed Billy he'd only seen looking at Nancy before. "Hey, what's *your* type anyway?" Billy said.

They stood there on the steps and Steve watched a gust of wind blow a lock of blonde hair over Billy's crystal blue eyes. He licked his lips and said, "I'm pretty sure it's bitchy fucking blondes."

Steve watched Billy's mouth part and was without a doubt that if they hadn't been around people Billy would've kissed him, but they were.

"Hey!" Nancy shouted from the next fifth hole. "You guys gonna take all day?"

Billy was still staring at him and Steve grinned and skipped down the stairs. "C'mon, blondie! Show me more of your shitty putting."

Steve beat Billy by *eleven* strokes and they loitered by a low wall off the course where people could stand around to eat mediocre fried food sold by the concession stand. Nancy and Jonathan went to buy sodas and Steve leaned on the wall and eyed Billy who stood up against the chain link fence. He was holding the club behind his neck, resting his wrists at either end. Steve thought he looked illegally hot. He wished he had a camera.

"Somebody owes me some cigarettes," Steve said. He kicked Billy's boot.

"You'll get em' when you get em'," Billy said, and Steve clenched his jaw. "Or you can come over here and get em'."

Billy wore the cocksure expression of a man who assumed his bluff would not be called.

But Steve was feeling very good.

Steve well knew that Billy's cigarettes were in his back pocket and he said, "Alright." He walked up to Billy, too close for any excusable reason and reached around him. When he slipped his hand into Billy's right back pocket he heard Billy's little gasp, saw his lashes flutter, his lips twitch just inches away from his own, his hands still gripping the club behind his neck. Steve smelled Billy's cologne and his cigarette breath and a little bit of sweat. He pulled Billy forward with a jerk and he took hold of the cigarettes, his hand smothered in warm denim, his thumb digging into Billy's ass cheek. "Got it," Steve whispered, and pulled out the pack. He kept his eyes on Billy's as he took out a smoke and stuck it behind his ear, put a second in his mouth, and stuck a third between Billy's lips, and put the pack back where he'd found it. "Don't worry, I'll get the lighter,"

Steve said around his cig and he slid his palm down Billy's chest, feeling his heartbeat and the quickness of his breathing as he turned his hand to reach into Billy's front pocket. Their noses brushed and Steve almost felt Billy's lips on his, the course around them disappearing, the entire world going away as Steve rummaged in Billy's front pocket and felt the tightness of his abdomen, the muscles quivering, and Billy's hips jutted forward and Steve *shook* , resisting every urge to let the cigarette drop from his mouth and kiss him. Finally he grabbed the hot metal of the Zippo in his hand. He fumbled for a second, flipping it open and lighting his own smoke and then Billy's.

Billy hummed around his cigarette, smoke billowing between them, as Steve reached in again to return the Zippo to its rightful place.

Steve finally stepped back and he felt pretty pleased with himself, if horribly turned on. But Billy's knuckles were white as he gripped the club, one ankle crossed over the other.

"Bitchy blondes?" Billy mumbled around his Marlboro.

Steve grinned at him and tipped forward half-falling to lean on the low wall overlooking the course.

"Looks like it," Steve said, taking a drag.

There was nobody in their little corner, which made it okay when Billy came up close beside him against the wall and dropped the club and said, "Farrah Fawcett hairspray huh?"

Steve felt seemingly every drop of blood rush to his face and his head turned jerkily as he gaped at Billy. "What?" He took his cigarette from his mouth.

"Wheeler told me," Billy said, pointing at Steve with his cigarette. "And *headgear* ? Man. I'd put down serious cash just for the pictures."

"Why the fuck-"

"I straightened out her eyeliner."

"Um...what?"

“Wheeler. I taught her how to do eyeliner,” Billy said, as if there was nothing at all strange about it. “Taught her pencil for the hairspray story and liquid for the headgear shit. Well worth it.”

“You asked about me?” Steve said softly.

“Jesus, Harrington. That’s the only reason I went to Wheeler’s to begin with.”

“Ha...” Steve bit his lip, attempting to contain his grin. “Yeah, well I got high as hell and rambled to Byers about you for...I dunno, hours maybe.”

“Yeah?” Billy looked giddy. “Ya know, I helped her out with the Flannery O’Connor for a little extra information too...”

Steve inwardly braced himself and took a long drag. “Okay. What the hell did she tell you?”

“You sure you want to know?” Billy said.

“Oh Christ. Spill it, blondie.”

“Okay,” Billy whispered. But he said nothing and Steve was confused until Billy moved and then there was a hand resting at Steve’s lower back. Billy faced forward but his warm hand with the corded veins that stood out when he held his golf club too tight snuck under Steve’s shirt and rubbed at Steve’s lower back, heading just a little bit south of the waistband in the magical area just above his ass, thumbs pressing into one of the two dimples Steve had there. Steve, who happened to be extraordinarily sensitive in that area gasped and his cigarette fell out of his mouth.

“Ah,” Steve said. “Um...” He gripped the stone wall, wanting to melt into the floor and take Billy with him.

Billy’s breath puffed in his ear as he quietly said, “She said you like this.”

“Uh huh.” Steve turned his head and his lips brushed Billy’s cheek.

Billy massaged him and Steve’s polo was halfway up his back now

and he shivered from the combination of the cool breeze and the heat of Billy's hand.

"Guess she wasn't lying," Billy murmured.

"No..." Steve was dizzy, hard, on the verge of frustrated. "God... Come on." He pulled away from the wall and yanked on Bill's hand, dragging him away to the stairs. He pulled his shirt down and Billy stubbed his smoke out as he stumbled after Steve.

Steve knew the Blue Castle Family Fun Center like the back of his hand and he led Billy back down through the course and they passed Jonathan and Nancy at a snack area, canoodling and eating nachos. He saw Nancy smile at them, her gaze falling to their clasped hands. Steve threw open the door to the adjoining arcade and shoved his way through clusters of kids and teenagers. He passed the ski-ball and Pac Man and Whack-a-Mole and found his target.

"In here." Steve slipped behind the curtain of a photo-booth, yanking Billy along with him.

In the photo-booth, Steve sat on the too narrow bench and Billy practically fell into his lap. Billy twisted around, wasting no time, his palm at the back of Steve's head, his other at Steve's waist. He came in for a kiss and Steve smirked, pulling away.

"Hey, remember," Steve said, "it's not a game of strength."

"Jesus, Harrington," Billy said, chuckling.

Steve teased him, nosing at his chin, but he wrapped his arms around Billy's neck. "Be gentle," he murmured. He finally kissed Billy, softly. Billy's lips were warm and slightly chapped and Steve paused and rested his mouth against Billy's for one nearly awkward moment, lost in just that simple sensation. "Plant your feet," Steve mumbled and felt Billy's chuckle and his lips curving up and he kissed Billy's bottom lip and held him closer. They were just kissing, the smack of their mouths lost in the hubbub of the arcade outside. Billy's hand went under Steve's shirt again and rubbed at that magical spot and Steve tugged at Billy's hair and nudged his mouth open. Billy hummed and pressed him back against the opposite wall of the booth

and it was too small a space for this and not entirely comfortable and Steve was sure his feet were peeking out under the curtain and that it was obvious nobody was taking pictures but he didn't care because Billy was going for his neck and squeezing his hip and he was dizzy. He reached back and groped Billy's ass and then Billy nibbled on his earlobe and he thought he might die.

They completely lost track of time and were probably lucky nobody else wanted to use the photo-booth until Nancy's voice outside the curtain said, "Um, hey guys!"

They broke apart, breathless, mouths swollen, hair inappropriately mussed. Steve snorted a laugh and grinned at Billy, pushing back his catastrophic I-was-just-making-out hair and tried not to be hard, which was difficult. It took them a minute but they finally came out, looking sheepish.

"Hey," Steve said casually. "We were taking pictures."

"Yeah?" Jonathan said. "Where are the pictures?"

Billy said, "Uh..."

"Well, we were thinking about it," Steve said. "How'd you know we were in there?"

Nancy said, "I saw biker boots and Adidas. I put two and two together."

Steve saw Billy turn red and thought it was way too cute. "Oh. Well."

Nancy only rolled her eyes and laughed at them putting on any pretense. She smacked Billy's shoulder. "Guys, c'mon. Let's take some actual pictures."

Billy sighed heavily. "Aw, Wheeler."

"Aw Wheeler," Nancy mimicked. "Come on, dummies."

Steve produced a wad of singles and they took strips of pictures in every possible combination; Nancy and Steve looking relaxed and comfortable with each other and grinning into the camera, Nancy

and Billy making faces and one where Nancy's hand covered his mouth while he glowered, Jonathan and Billy looking a little dazed and smiling awkwardly as if they didn't quite know what to make of each other, Jonathan and Steve bugging out their eyes like surprised aliens, Nancy and Jonathan being lovey dovey and sweet, Billy and Steve appearing ecstatic and one where Billy forgot to look at the camera and was instead caught staring at Steve with hearts in his eyes. For the final strip they all squeezed in together spilling out of the booth and Billy's tongue wagged at the camera and Nancy yelped because his elbow was digging into her boob and Steve's hand was pressing down on Jonathan's head and messing up his hair as his face twisted but Nancy declared the pictures perfect anyway.

They fucked around in the arcade for a while, Billy and Steve getting into an absurdly competitive ski-ball face-off followed by the revelation that Nancy knew what she was doing with Ms. Pac-Man. They ate chicken strips and rootbeer floats, Steve and Billy playing footsie under the table and not fooling anyone. In the Camaro, on the way back, they were happy and sleepy and Steve sat close to Billy as he drove and played with his hair.

"Jack and Diane" came on the radio and Nancy and Steve both said, "Hey, turn that up!"

Jonathan and Billy groaned and Steve cranked up the volume and sang along with Nancy: "Little ditty 'bout Jack and Diaaaane!"

"Byers!" Billy said. "You believe this shit?"

"It's killing me, man," Jonathan said, laughing, his arm around Nancy.

Steve kissed Billy's cheek and said, "Deal with it, blondie."

"So," Nancy said, "what are we doing next weekend?"